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Special Analysis

USSR:

Implications of Freeing Sakharov

General Secretary Gorbachev's willingness to allow Andrey Sakharov to speak freely is a bold stroke designed to persuade foreign audiences that the Soviet leader is serious about democratizing the Soviet system and to strengthen his support among reform-minded officials and the intelligentsia.

The regime's efforts to facilitate publicity for Sakharov's views since his return to Moscow are unprecedented. The state organization that controls radio and television broadcasting allowed US television networks to interview Sakharov in its studios. Sakharov said Saturday that the Soviet weekly *Literary Gazette* had interviewed him and might publish the interview today, according to Western press reporting.

External Purposes

Foreign policy calculations have played a role in the regime's about-face on Sakharov. It deflects Western criticism of the death in prison of longtime human rights activist Anatoliy Marchenko and enhances Gorbachev's efforts to develop his image abroad.

The move was probably designed in part to facilitate progress on arms control and to smooth the way for expanded trade with Western Europe. In the CSCE forum, it removes one of several impediments to Western participation in the humanitarian affairs conference that the Soviets have proposed to be held in Moscow. The desire to remove the Sakharov case as a roadblock to broadening scientific exchanges with the West may also have been a factor, as Sakharov himself has suggested.

Anticipated Domestic Benefits

The decision to arrange for Sakharov to be interviewed by domestic and foreign media was also prompted by Gorbachev's need to generate new momentum for his effort to revitalize Soviet society. Many disgruntled officials and intellectuals see the handling of Sakharov as a key barometer of the regime's commitment to reform.

Many Soviet cultural, scientific, and intellectual figures and low-level officials admire Sakharov, according to interviews by USIA of Westerners who have had contact with them. A KGB defector has reported widespread sympathy for Sakharov among intellectuals, who

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sometimes compared his confinement to Gorky with Lenin in exile. Among Soviet scientists, on whose support Gorbachev relies for his economic modernization program, concern for Sakharov's welfare has been widespread; his membership in the Academy of Sciences was maintained throughout his period of internal exile, and he received a warm welcome on his return to the Institute of Physics last week.

Gorbachev probably expects that Sakharov's freedom to speak will further his efforts to lure back prominent Russian cultural figures who have emigrated or defected to the West. The regime has recently used intermediaries to make overtures about the return of theater director Yuriy Lyubimov, who apparently will go back, and several others, according to Western press reports and US Embassy contacts. Last week, in an unusual, laudatory obituary of film director Andrey Tarkovskiy, who had defected in Western Europe several years ago, TASS lamented the continued foreign exile of Russian cultural figures.

Gorbachev may calculate that Sakharov will support many of his policies. Although Sakharov has been outspoken since his return to Moscow about the regime's abuses of human rights and has publicly acknowledged that President Reagan's attention to these abuses has helped Soviet dissidents, he has also conveyed a belief that Gorbachev is moving in the right direction domestically. Sakharov has unequivocally endorsed Gorbachev's policy of cultural openness. Moreover, Soviet propagandists can exploit Sakharov's expressions of skepticism about SDI, even though Sakharov has also urged that the USSR not make other arms control agreements contingent on a restriction of SDI.

Political Implications

No Soviet leader has gone to such lengths to court Soviet intellectuals since the cultural thaw under Khrushchev. Gorbachev's doing so suggests that he is willing, and possibly even compelled, to seek support wherever he can find it.

Gorbachev's difficulty in forging a consensus in the Politburo for his domestic programs might have been at least partly responsible for his decision to release Sakharov. By increasing his personal popularity among those intellectuals and lower-level officials pushing for a broad program of reform, Gorbachev may intend to increase pressure on other Politburo members to go along with his program for domestic revitalization. Combined with other moves to broaden the arena and scope of policy discussion, Gorbachev's encouragement of Sakharov to air his views publicly risks provoking a backlash among conservatives wary of carrying openness too far and opposed to various other elements of Gorbachev's domestic strategy.